



Chapter 12

The Hidden Face of Christ: Chesterton and the Concealment of (Divine) Mirth

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Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a fire that breaks out backstage in a theatre.¹ A clown charges out onto the stage to warn the audience of the danger but, because he is already dressed up for his show, the audience members mistake his warning for comedy. They laugh and clap and ultimately fail to respond to the real threat he is trying to save them from. Kierkegaard speculates that the world is likely to end “amid general applause” like this because so many people believe that what they are witnessing is only “a joke.” Considering this more deeply, in this story, Kierkegaard sets up a distinction – along soteriological lines – between what appears and what may be concealed by appearance. It seems to me that Kierkegaard means this distinction between the apparent and the hidden to be the fundamental issue at play. His clown is perhaps a symbol of Christ, the light that shines without the darkness comprehending it.² Another reading of his parable would suggest that Kierkegaard has granted a deeper ontological importance to seriousness and a lesser significance to hilarity. After all, the crowd misses the truth precisely because

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, ed. Charles E Moore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 404; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (New Jersey: Princeton, 1978), 3. The parable in question is based on real events; see Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmisse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 774.

2 John 1.5.

they are amused. They are, to reference Neil Postman, amused to death.³

However, such a conclusion can be assumed to be right only if we believe that Kierkegaard has ontologised the sin that he is referencing through his metaphor of the backstage fire. In fact, his selection of the clown as the hilarious messenger is entirely congruent with the idea that hilarity can be found beyond the immediate danger. If there were no fire, after all, the clowning could continue as planned. To miss this implication would be to fail to attend properly to the distinction, albeit a porous one, between appearance and reality. What is hidden is sometimes, as in this case, hidden in plain sight. The clown may be taken as a symbol, therefore, of a deeper joy that we would miss if we were to get too caught up in the wrong meanings. The immediate and thoroughly fleeting desire to laugh is, in a way, both revealing and concealing of a desire for an even deeper, more permanent sense of divine delight.

A similar idea is found in the work of G. K. Chesterton. “[A]pppearances,” Chesterton notes, have rather a lot to do with “disappearances.”⁴ It is this gap – and something of the bridging of this gap – between appearances and disappearances that I want to address here. In this chapter, I explore what it means that Chesterton is always on the lookout for joy, for this is surely something that even the most casual reading of his work brings to light. In this, I argue that his preoccupation with joy is in fact bound up in what Marshall McLuhan suggests is his tireless preoccupation with formal causality.⁵ I argue, therefore, that there is a link between a particular metaphysical concern and a certain attitude of mind, or perhaps a certain posture towards being. Chestertonian hilarity, in other words, offers a kind of perceptual key to the joy that transcends both comedy and tragedy. As Chesterton suggests, “far from it being irrelevant” to resort to

3 Cf. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 1985).

4 G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993 [1925]), 265.

5 Marshall McLuhan, “Formal Causality in Chesterton,” in Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (Houston: NeoPoeisis, 2011), 73.

joviality on matters of faith and metaphysics, it is actually “a test of one’s seriousness.”⁶ As this implies, there is ultimately, for him, no dichotomy between hilarity and seriousness, insofar as they reveal reality rightly.

At the very end of his book *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chesterton makes a claim regarding the “pathos” of Christ, which was “natural,” and “almost casual.” But he contends that one dimension of Christ’s pathos remained strikingly hidden, namely, his “mirth.”⁷ The word *mirth*, a synonym for *amusement*, is the last word of that book – a book that is allocated a pivotal place in Chesterton scholarship. The word is jotted down not as a flippant observation but as an exclamation mark on that spiritual autobiography. However, because Chesterton offers no justification for attributing mirth to Christ, the question remains open as to whether there is more than a merely subjective reason for his claim. To clarify the above-mentioned aim here, I want to account for this very claim on a philosophical and theological basis. I want to articulate how there is in Chesterton’s writings, especially exemplified in his metaphysical thriller *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1907), an incarnational metaphysical vision at work that reconciles the more explicit dimensions of Christ’s *pathos* with a concealed divine mirth. In a sense, Chesterton presents Christ as being a lot like Kierkegaard’s clown. He is not laughing for the moment, of course, while things are going awry, but this does not mean that he does not plan to laugh later. Indeed, as I hope to show, Chesterton’s consistent search for insight into the formal cause is thus not merely an abstract concern but is instead something with profound existential and emotional resonances. By implication, his metaphysics is not unphenomenological but profoundly rooted in a desire to let reality show itself as itself, as well as to let perceptible reality show more than itself.

The Man Who Was Thursday opens with a dialogue, or rather an argument, between two poets in the suburb of Saffron Park.

6 G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 27: Illustrated London News 1905–1907* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 206.

7 G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, the Blatchford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 365–366.

The setting is significant. For one thing, it is a real place and not a mere fictional conceit. Chesterton takes the time to articulate it as a place in which being subverts imagining even as it encourages imagination. One young man there, for instance, “with the long, auburn hair and the impudent face—that young man was not really a poet; but surely he was a poem.” And an “old gentleman with the wild, white beard and the wild, white hat—that venerable humbug was not really a philosopher; but at least he was the cause of philosophy in others.” Chesterton mocks the scientist who shows up in the suburb, too: “That scientific gentleman with the bald, egg-like head and the bare, bird-like neck had no real right to the airs of science that he assumed. He had not discovered anything new in biology; but what biological creature could he have discovered more singular than himself?”⁸

What is important, therefore, is not so much the *ideas* that people in this setting have but *who they are in the flesh*. This is vital for understanding Chesterton’s work as a whole. In his book *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910), he writes, “Each human soul has in a sense to enact for itself the gigantic humility of the Incarnation. Every man must descend into the flesh to meet mankind.”⁹ Chesterton is clear to mention that this atmosphere of incarnation in Saffron Park feels like a “comedy.”¹⁰ In this place in which reality constantly throws into question the way that people conceptualise it, we find the birthplace of laughter. Although the novel itself is very funny, Chesterton has given it a surprising subtitle; it is *A Nightmare*. I say more about this below.

In this setting, as I mentioned, two poets are arguing. The poets in question are Gabriel Syme and Lucian Gregory. We soon learn that Gabriel Syme symbolises order and Lucian Gregory symbolises chaos, although the line between order and chaos is not so clear.¹¹ In other words, Syme stands for the principle of the

8 G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999 [1907]), 35.

9 G. K. Chesterton. *Collected Works, Volume IV: What’s Wrong with the World, The Superstition of Divorce, Eugenics and Other Evils, and others* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 93–94.

10 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 35.

11 Michael D. Hurley, *G. K. Chesterton* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2012), 29.

one, while Gregory stands for the principle of the many. These principles are at odds with each other. The principle of the many, in particular, seems to relish dwelling amidst the equivocalities of being. It is no mistake that the two characters here have names that echo the names of angels, although the connection between *Lucian Gregory* and *Lucifer* is slightly less obvious.¹² He is an anarchist who quite literally wants to blow things up with bombs. Chesterton takes *anarchy* as a synonym for *nihilism*; it means a manyness without any awareness of unity. It implies the “[hatred] of life itself.”¹³

The main point of contention between the poets revolves around the nature of poetry. To put it misleadingly simply, Gregory sees art and anarchy as coextensive.¹⁴ For him, to make poetry exciting, the poet must aim to constantly pervert norms. The anarchist claims that an artist “disregards all governments” and “abolishes all conventions”; he insists that “[t]he poet delights in disorder only. If it were not so, the most poetical thing in the world would be the [London] Underground Railway.” Against this, Syme, who reflects the Chestertonian view that free verse in poetry enslaves it, regards poetry – meaning structured poetry – as being about ordering. Syme believes that the London Underground really is “the most poetical thing in the world.” This upsets Gregory greatly. He tells Syme that he is talking nonsense. After all, he explains, “Why do all the clerks and navvies in the railway trains look ... so very sad and tired?”¹⁵ The anarchist speculates that the people on a train are despondent because they know that the train will end up precisely where they expect it to end up. Where is the thrill and adventure in that?

Syme, who is a better poet (and a better psychologist and metaphysician) than Gregory, refuses to take this appearance

12 In the end, the hint of this connection is made explicit as Gregory is revealed later to be a devil incarnate.

13 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 82.0

14 Chesterton attacks Gregory’s position on poetry directly in an article written for *The Speaker*, published on 29 March 1902. That article, “A Sermon on Cheapness” is reprinted in G. K. Chesterton, *The Apostle and the Wild Ducks and Other Essays*, ed. Dorothy Collins (London: Wheaton, 1975), 1–4.

15 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 39.

at face value. He reads the Underground poetically, and not as a univocal expression. If people can remain so blasé on the Underground, he implies, it is because they have overlooked and forgotten what disappears from view. They have become habituated to custom and so have forgotten how remarkable the customary is. More particularly, they have lost contact with the consciousness out of which the needful order has been granted. On the surface, everything can seem placid and banal and lacking in spirit – and therefore also lacking in meaning. But this surface is not the whole story. “The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark,” Syme purposes. “[T]he gross, obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when a man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when a man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull; because in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street or to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria [Station], and lo! it is Victoria.”¹⁶

Chesterton claims that behind every appearance of order is an occluded battle against disorder; and, moreover, that all signs of disorder occlude, but can also potentially reveal, a deeper order. Syme remarks “that every time a train comes in” he feels “that it has broken past batteries of besiegers, and that man has won a battle against chaos.”¹⁷ Already in this, we sense something of how Chesterton is gesturing to mirth beyond the serious, even if we have not yet grasped the meaning of this. If trains and train schedules seem boring it is not because they are boring. Behind them is the delight of being able to grant order to the world. Chesterton perceives this, and so does Syme, because of a sense that things do not merely exist to be consumed; or perhaps that things are not merely there to be subsumed into the predetermined. When we allow them to be themselves, things resist us. In their contingency, they alert us to their otherness. Perception is not equal, therefore, to mastery. It is humbler than that.

16 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 39.

17 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 41.

“There are no uninteresting things,” Chesterton writes in *Heretics* (1905), “only uninterested people.”¹⁸ Given what has been said above, we might take this to mean that things cannot be taken as equal to what our metaphysical boredom might impose on them. If we take the trouble to care, we would fairly easily notice that behind the given is a loving act of creation. To be clear, this is not to simplistically side with order against chaos, just as one would not necessarily side with the univocal against the equivocal, or with humour against all seriousness. The dichotomy is not ultimately as clear as it would seem. Equivocacies remain in being itself. The point is that the tension between order and chaos is mediated; and it is in this grace called mediation that we find the hidden work of mirth.¹⁹ In fact, as I unpack in greater detail below, it is in a particular posture towards this mediation, a mindfulness of the between as suggested by the work of William Desmond, that not only do we discover mirth but also discover a sense of the formal cause.

Chesterton has a problem with a particular mindset that insists on making the world small—that is, on reducing being to one’s conception of being. He takes issue, in other words, with reframing reality as something that ought to conform to any desire to eradicate mediation. The poet Syme in *The Man Who Was Thursday* goes against this tendency to univocalise or equivocalise—both postures involve a denial of mediation—and so gives himself over to the lingering, sometimes hesitant otherness of the call of the real. “God made man so that he was capable of coming into contact with reality,” writes Chesterton in his biography of *St. Thomas Aquinas*, “and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder.”²⁰ Sadly, as Chesterton points out, “[i]n most important matters, man has always been free to

18 Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 54.

19 I write on the grace of mediation in the conclusion of my book on Chesterton. See Duncan Reyburn, *Seeing Things as They Are: G. K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene: Cascade, 2016). I also articulate something of what this mediatory mirth looks like in Duncan Reyburn, “A Kindly Scandal: A Mimetic Theory of Humor.” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 28 (2021): 201–236.

20 G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas & St. Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 170.

ruin himself.”²¹ He will ruin his chances of participating in the real. Still, in the archetypal tension between order and chaos, God, Light from Light, announces light – and there is light.²² There is, in other words, to use Syme’s metaphor, the London Underground.

In considering the book of Job that acts as inspiration for *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton mentions especially how God announces his entrance by declaring that, behind the obvious difficulties of life, there is delight: “When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”²³ Perhaps even suffering hides a mirthful face. The revealed order conceals a mystery, and that mystery suggests transcendental joy. Chesterton invites his reader to look again, to resist taking the familiar as equal to the settling of a matter. How does he do this? Importantly, he refuses to let his rhetorical constructions linger as merely rhetorical. In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, for example, he is not trying to position himself within a contingent distinction between the orderly and the chaotic. Instead, he wants to aim for an incarnate experience of ontological stability and oneness beyond contingency. It is possible that Lucian Gregory’s disastrous nihilism stems, in part, from an unconscious desire to uncover what is going on beneath the surface. Nevertheless, he keeps getting stuck on the surface. He places all things at odds with all other things, failing to discover the unity beneath. Against this, Chesterton asks us to leave the representational world and enter the drama of being itself. He asks us, in other words, to escape the modern nominalist frame that would have us separate naming from being and to welcome us into a world in which naming reveals and intensifies being. Indeed, this is part of the function of one of the chief conceits of the novel: every man is given the name of a day of the week, not to conceal who he is but to reveal who he is. Each man is, arguably, the manifestation of some aspect of the liturgical calendar. For example, Thursday is *Maundy Thursday* and Sunday is the *Sabbath*. Sunday is also, very importantly, the formal cause. There is more on this shortly.

21 Chesterton. *Collected Works, Volume IV*, 142.

22 Genesis 1:1–3.

23 See Job 38:6–11; G. K. Chesterton. *In Defense of Sanity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 91–102.

In the end, insofar as the plot of *The Man Who Was Thursday* goes, the bold claims of these two poets cannot be settled except by experience. The poet must become the poem. He must recover the sense that he has always been a poem before being a poet. Ironically, perhaps, even the villain in the story agrees with the need to transpose thought into action. Gregory invites Syme to attend a meeting of anarchists to see for himself what sort of chaos they are plotting. Before the other members arrive and before the meeting commences, Gregory explains that he at one time made a habit of disguising himself in various ways. Again, Chesterton draws attention to *appearance* to suggest *disappearance* or concealment. However, it is clear that he means concealment to be a mode of revealing. After all, no one ever believed Gregory's disguises and so he ended up simply dressing like an anarchist. Again, no one believed him. Somehow showing the obvious truth became the best way to conceal the truth. No one would expect someone who looks like an anarchist to be an anarchist. If it walks like an anarchist and swims like an anarchist and quacks like an anarchist, it must be a perfectly sensible intellectual with no insidious motives at all.

Still, another way of interpreting this is as a way of showing that Gregory, standing for the principle of the many (against the one), is the symbol of modern dualism. His very being is forced into a terrible battle between univocity and equivocity that he cannot resolve on his own. And, in any case, he may in the end not be the anarchist he thinks he is. He has mistaken his self-understanding for genuine understanding. There is therefore a paradox here. On the one hand, Gregory is precisely what he seems to be. He is on the side of misrule and disintegration. On the other hand, however, his true identity is not in this. He was made for so much more, if only he would deny his false self and take up the cross of his true self. He would be better off giving up his persona for the sake of presence.

Still, Syme ends up at that meeting of anarchists, each of whom, as I have said, is named after a day of the week. Hilariously, Syme convinces the anarchist council to elect him, and not Gregory, as the replacement for the former Thursday, who recently died. He does so by sounding far more dangerous

than Gregory does – by being, in speech, more anarchic than the anarchist. Chesterton toys with a similar idea elsewhere, with particular reference to Christianity. It is the Christian, with his passions well anchored, who is able to be at once more pessimistic than Schopenhauer and more optimistic than Walt Whitman.²⁴ This anchoring of the passions, he suggests, is bound up in his willingness to tolerate paradox: a desire to have red and white at full force rather than to endure the sublation of red and white that results in an insipid pink. By implication, Syme is able to hold within himself a higher anarchy than what Gregory tolerates, even as Syme is able to be more respectful of authority. In fact, as the mysteries of the story are brought to light, all of the members of the anarchist's society are revealed to have retained a sense of the paradoxical: they are all anarchists who want order; they are all rebels whose rebellion is thoroughly doctrinal.

Still, ahead of this revelation, and certainly despite Gregory's protesting, Syme becomes the new Thursday. As this scene among the anarchists reveals, Chesterton renders the line between chaos and order, and thus between appearance and disappearance, ever more confusing and mysterious. The novel shows, through the experience of the protagonist Syme, a constant determination to unmask what appears and thus to reveal what is hidden – but without destroying all mystery. Identities are constantly mistaken, then corrected, as one by one each of the members of the collective of anarchists is revealed to be a policeman just like Syme. There's a perfect metaphor for revealing order *beneath* any appearance of chaos. And it is by no means coincidental that the order beneath the appearance is often funny. In *All Things Considered*, Chesterton suggests the following: "If you isolate a thing, you may get the pure essence of gravity. But if you take a large thing (such as the Solar System) it must be comic, at least in parts. The germs are serious, because they kill you. But the stars are funny, because they give birth to life, and life gives birth to fun."²⁵ This is to say, a perception of wholeness – the grounding pattern of being – opens away for hilarity. The

24 Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 189.

25 G. K. Chesterton, *All Things Considered* (London: Methuen, 1908), 152.

reverse may also prove to be true, where hilarity opens a way to better perceive the grounding of being in God. Just such a disclosure of wholeness confronts Syme, and so also the reader, with another paradox: unmasking does not put an end to the mystery. Revelation often *deepens* the mystery. At one significant moment in his story, Syme cries out, “Listen to me ... Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front —.”²⁶

This declaration begins to suggest why this story is given the subtitle, *A Nightmare*. Symbolically speaking, the antidote to a nightmare is not a dream (something pleasant) but the act of waking up (something that is potentially more unpleasant than the nightmare). And yet, the idea that we cannot see the hidden face of things suggests how difficult this waking up is. There is anguish in the experience. Syme is insistent on the Job-like suffering he experiences in endeavouring to see the hidden face of things.²⁷ Of course, this has tremendous theological significance. It echoes the scene in which Moses asks to see God’s glory in the book of Exodus. God responds that he will “make” his “goodness pass before [Moses]” but since no one can see his face and live, he will show Moses only his back.²⁸ There is something of this echoed in what Chesterton writes in his book on the artist G. F. Watts, who was fond of painting the backs of people:

The back is the most awful and mysterious thing in the universe: it is impossible to speak about it. It is the part of man that he knows nothing of; like an outlying province forgotten by an emperor. It is a common saying that anything may happen behind our backs: transcendently considered the thing has an eerie truth about it. Eden may be behind our backs, or Fairyland. But this mystery of the human back has again its other side in the strange

26 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 247.

27 Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, 263.

28 Exodus 33:18–20.

impression produced on those behind: to walk behind anyone along a lane is a thing that, properly speaking, touches the oldest nerve of awe.²⁹

As Chesterton more than hints here, knowing the back of things is to not know them. But that we *only* see the back of things has three important implications. Firstly, it means that we necessarily feel, in our encounters with the real, that there is always more there than we are conscious of. Perception itself, when we allow it to be itself, cannot take things at face value. This is unpacked, for example, in the work of Bernard Lonergan, who discusses how the most innocent of childlike questions, the question *Why?*, reveals an entirely natural, intuitive sense that we cannot apprehend anything without a sense of its contingency and its hidden causes. We assume formal causality, as that cause that implies and grounds the other causes, even though we tend to do so unconsciously.³⁰ Secondly, it means that the natural resistance that things offer to us in our perceiving them is in fact important to our perceiving them rightly. A complete conflation of subject and object, a dissolving of all differences, does not bring clarity. If anything, it represents death – the annihilation of both subjectivity and objectivity.

Then, thirdly, it means that we must speculate about the nature of the face of things. And yet, as suggested by the first implication, this speculation cannot merely exist at the level of what we are conscious of and what we might be able to articulate. We know this, especially from Chesterton's frequent articulations around his strong sense of contingency.³¹ This is not merely a conceptual category but is something felt in one's very depths. In this felt sense of the contingent, what appears is decidedly not self-caused. Its meaning is sustained by what transcends it. It is given but that only means that there is *that* which gives it or *one* who gives it. Perception itself, if allowed to be itself, refuses to

29 G. K. Chesterton, *G. F. Watts* (London: Duckworth, 1904), 136–139.

30 Eric McLuhan, "On Formal Cause," in *Media and Formal Cause*, 91.

31 See Miguel Romero & Duncan Reyburn, "Towards an expansive objective and a restricted experience in Everyday Aesthetics: A Chestertonian metaxological approach." *Revista KEPES* 24.8 (2021), 197–231.

take things at face value – it refuses to linger with abstractions and must, like Gabriel Syme, step into the drama of meaning. Perception is not its own ground.

Still, we tend to fall rather often into the trap of training perception to accept limits that are not inherently present within perception, while at the same time refusing the limits that are there. Perhaps better stated, we have a habit of causing perception to fall into disuse and misuse. This is just as bad, if not worse, than the problem of regarding perception as self-grounding and self-sustaining. If Lucian Gregory sees only the value of chaos, it is because he is not attending to the real. His very being is granted, but he takes this for granted. This is a reminder of Chesterton's awareness of how we lose contact with reality. I quote here at length from Chesterton's *The Defendant*:

Religion has had to provide that longest and strangest telescope—the telescope through which we could see the star upon which we dwelt. For the mind and eyes of the average man this world is as lost as Eden and as sunken as Atlantis. There runs a strange law through the length of human history—that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves.³² The great sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not[only] towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility. This is the great fall, the fall by which the fish forgets the sea, the ox forgets the meadow, the clerk forgets the city, every man forgets his environment and, in the fullest and most literal sense, forgets himself. This is the real fall of Adam, and it is a spiritual fall. It is a strange thing that men ... have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.³³

32 In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton claims, “the most dangerous environment of all is the commodious environment”; Chesterton, *The Collected Works, Volume 1*, 323.

33 G. K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (London: JM Dent, 1907[1901]), 12–13.

Note here how Chesterton connects the fall with an over-reliance on univocal conceptual configurations, which banish a sense of formal causality in favor of the other causes, especially efficient causality. We fail to perceive what is right in front of our eyes, and so require something that will allow us to reconnect with it. Our abstractions are often a defense against the real. Paul Rowan explains how crucial the above passage is for understanding Chesterton's perpetual concern with how "human beings have forgotten who they are."³⁴ The trouble is not just in the forgetting of the world but in the forgetting of our very selves. We far too easily lose a felt sense of our embeddedness within the drama of meaning. What does the forgetting of self, differing as it does from self-forgetting or humility, look like? For Chesterton, in sticking with the biblical envisioning of pride as going before a fall while also noting how this distorts even our capacity for humility,³⁵ the result is over-seriousness. The prideful do not laugh easily and are in fact monstrous in their seriousness.³⁶ Here, however, I want to suggest that the opposite is also possible. Pride can be manifest in a refusal to take anything seriously, in an essentialising of irony as a posture towards being. Both over-seriousness and excessive irony point to a loss of humility.

In *Orthodoxy*, transcending both over-seriousness and excessive flippancy, Chesterton suggests that "[m]an is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial." He is very critical of over-seriousness in particular, as I have suggested, but this has implications for trivialising everything too. Taking joy out of the picture causes people to be unhealthily complacent in their self-satisfaction. Over-seriousness produces stale perceptions, and this is not something Chesterton can tolerate. He writes:

The swiftest things are the softest things. A bird is active, because a bird is soft. A stone is helpless, because a stone

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- 34 Paul Rowan, *The Scrapy Evangelist* (Charlotte: ACS Books, 2017), 48.
35 Proverbs 16:18; Augustine, *City of God* 14. 13; *De Genesi ad litteram* 11. 14. 18.
36 G. K. Chesterton, "'The Personality of Mr. Gladstone.'" *The Speaker* (10 October 1903).

is hard. The stone must by its own nature go downwards, because hardness is weakness. The bird can of its nature go upwards, because fragility is force ... Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. ... Pride is the downward drag of all things into an easy solemnity. One 'settles down' into a sort of selfish seriousness; but one has to rise to ... self-forgetfulness ... Seriousness is not a virtue. It would be ... much more sensible ... to say that seriousness is a vice. It is really a natural trend or lapse into taking one's self gravely, because it is the easiest thing to do. It is much easier to write a good *Times* leading article than a good joke in *Punch*. For solemnity flows out of men naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy: hard to be light.³⁷

Again, Chesterton's concern is with *connection* to reality. It becomes apparent that Chesterton on the whole connects severity or solemnity, as a particular form of attention that eradicates the possibility of humor as antithetical to such a connection. The obverse is also true. Flippant joking may conceal a deep failure to attend properly to joy. Transcending these is an ontological attunement to formal causality; that is, to the whole picture of the world presented to us. This connection is highlighted by McLuhan when he discusses Chesterton's constant attention to formal causality. It is by now not controversial to point out that, in general, modernity and its aftermath have tended to exaggerate, even to the point of grotesqueness, all attention on efficient causality at the expense of the other causes. This has encouraged a tendency to conceive of things as equal to their appearances within a chain of cause and effect. In other words, even something as complex as understanding may be grounded in a monocausal process or structure, rather than in a larger sense of the patterns of the real. Given this bias in attention, the entire field of meaning too easily gets reduced to the most immediate appearance of things. Univocity and equivocity, as supposedly unmediated, are accepted without question. This, at least, is what is suggested by the character of Lucian Gregory. This coincides with a tendency to reduce meaning to having a seemingly uncontestable

37 Chesterton, *The Collected Works*, Volume 1, 325–326.

character, implying that there is a stress on directness against the difference.³⁸ Put briefly, this mode of attention sacrifices a sense of form, and with it a sense of joy that can anchor both humor and seriousness. It is only in attuning ourselves to the formal cause, to analogy beyond univocal sameness and equivocal difference, that we stand a chance of knowing when to laugh and when to cry.

And seriousness, on its own, is no guarantee of this analogical awareness. In fact, on its own, it almost certainly ensures disconnection. Chesterton suggests that it is “the test of one’s seriousness” to “use silly metaphors on serious questions.” In fact, a “responsible religion” can be defended “grotesquely.” “It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.”³⁹ He is not encouraging irreverence here. In fact, he sees *humour* and *humanity* and *humility*, which in English are linked etymologically, as connected with an essential vulnerability to being. He means that by loosening up our over-seriousness, we may discover a deeper joy, and a deeper reason for our seriousness. In fact, in locating the depths, it is not only hilarity that is guaranteed but also sorrow. “If you have a good heart,” he writes, “you will always have some lightness of heart; you will always have the power of enjoying special human feasts, and positive human good news. But the heart which is there to be lightened will also be there to be hurt.”⁴⁰ If Christ could show his sorrows without being overcome by them, this is precisely a signal of his capacity for joviality. The same vulnerability to being supports both mourning and levity. Mirth, then, is not the *opposite* of seriousness but its *obverse*. “The more one suffers,” Kierkegaard writes, “the more ... one has a sense for the comic.”⁴¹

As the above suggests, Chesterton is not merely encouraging a correct view of things in the sense of providing a checklist of doctrines. He is not offering us yet another univocal set of instructions. He is not arguing for a mere reconceptualisation of the real – as if the problem is in our thinking primarily and not in

38 William Desmond, *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 6.

39 G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (9 June 1906).

40 G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (11 January 1908).

41 Kierkegaard, *The Parables of Kierkegaard*, 30.

us. Rather, he is encouraging us to embrace what is – *as lived*. This is the central key to understanding his view that Christ's hidden face is mirthful. This is not to explain Christ but to embrace the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation more fully. Chesterton writes the following on what it means to be human, and already here we find a hint of how the mirthful points to the more than mirthful:

Man himself is a joke in the sense of a paradox. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself.⁴²

42 Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 36.